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(54) **FLAKES WITH UNDULATE BORDERS AND METHOD OF FORMING THEREOF**

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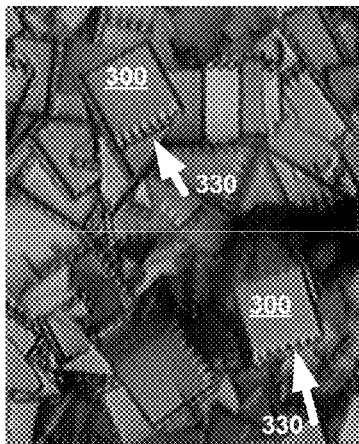
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(57)

ABSTRACT

In a plurality of substantially same planar pigment flakes, each flake is formed of one or more thin film layers. Each flake has a face surface and a flake border delimiting the face surface; the flake border undulates in the plane of the flake. The flakes have a pre-selected shape, may have a symbol or a grating thereon. A method of manufacturing of these flakes including the steps of: (a) providing a substrate having a plurality of one-flake regions and a plurality of depressions or protrusions disposed therebetween and not extending into the one-flake regions, (b) coating the substrate with a releasable coating, and (c) removing the releasable coating and breaking it into the flakes; wherein two adjacent of the one-flake regions are separated by at least three of the depressions or protrusions for facilitating the breaking of the releasable coating into the flakes.

9 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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7,241,489, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/641,695, filed on Aug. 14, 2003, now Pat. No. 7,258,915, and a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/243,111, filed on Sep. 13, 2002, now Pat. No. 6,902,807.

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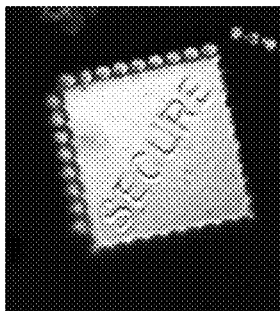


FIG. 1

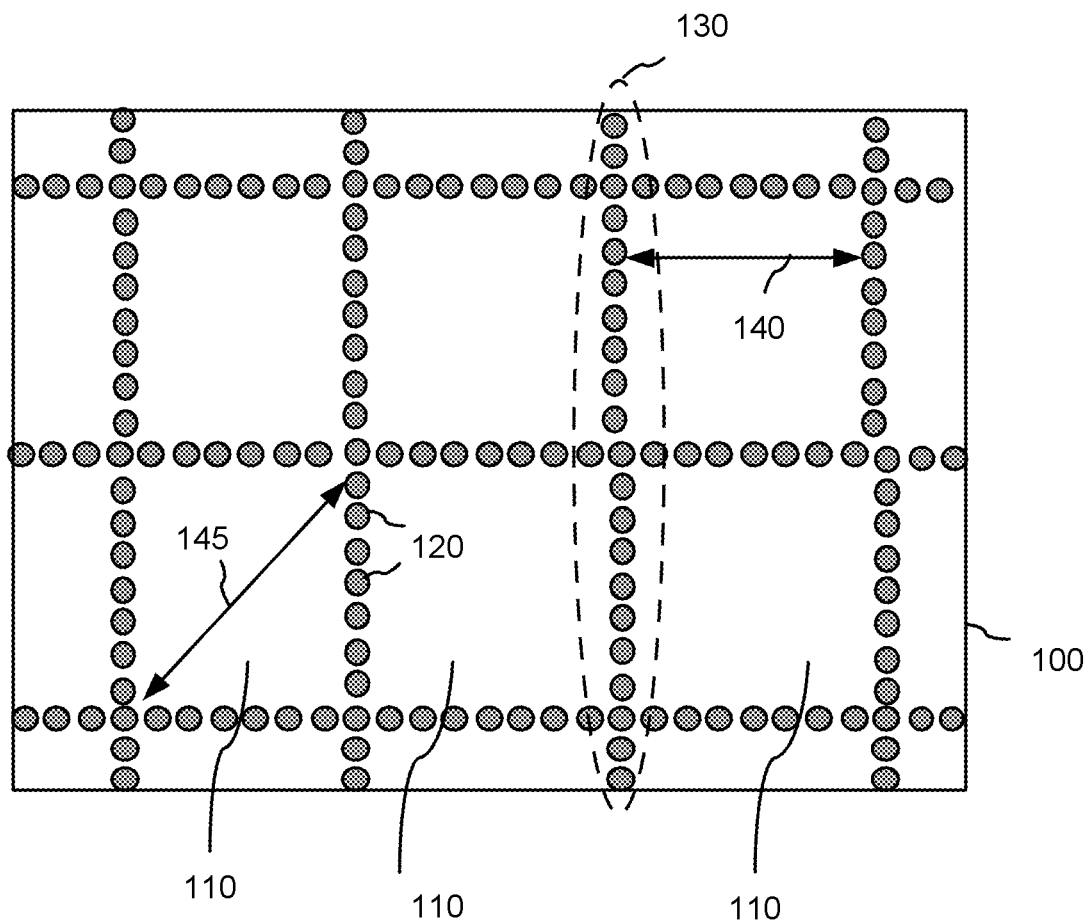


FIG. 2

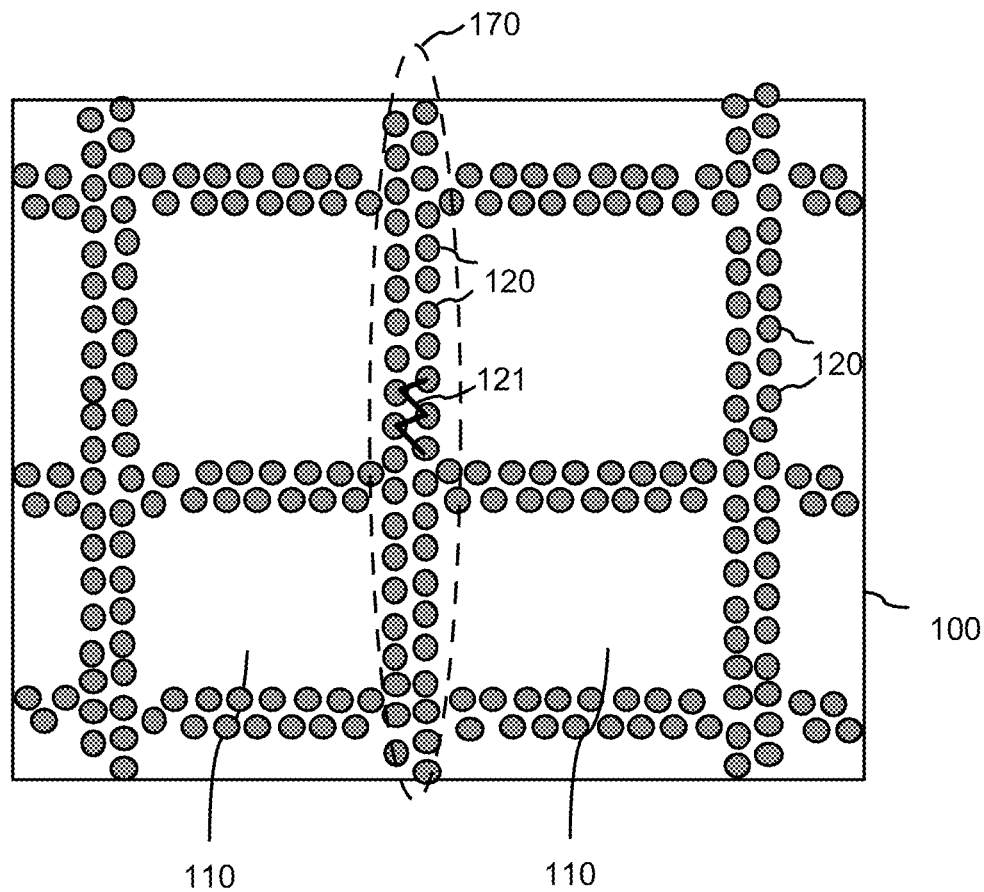


FIG. 3

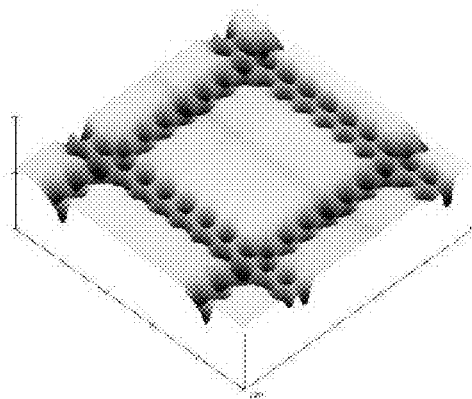


FIG. 4

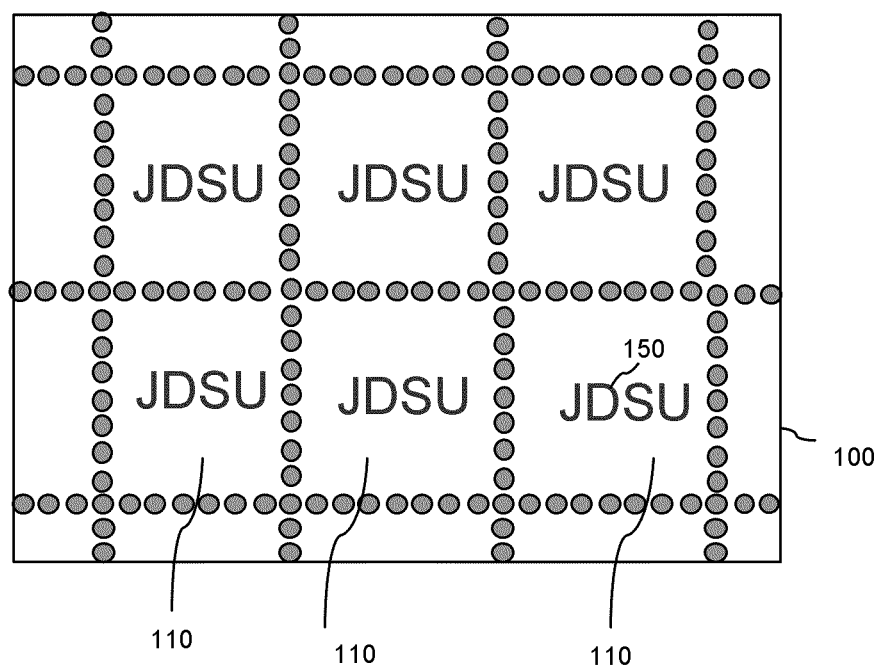


FIG. 5A

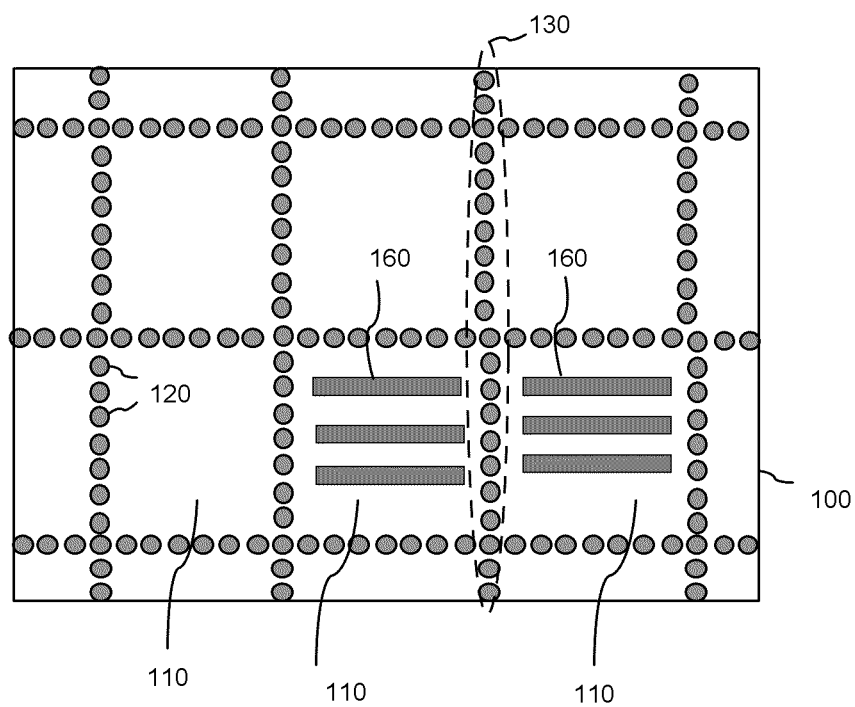


FIG. 5B

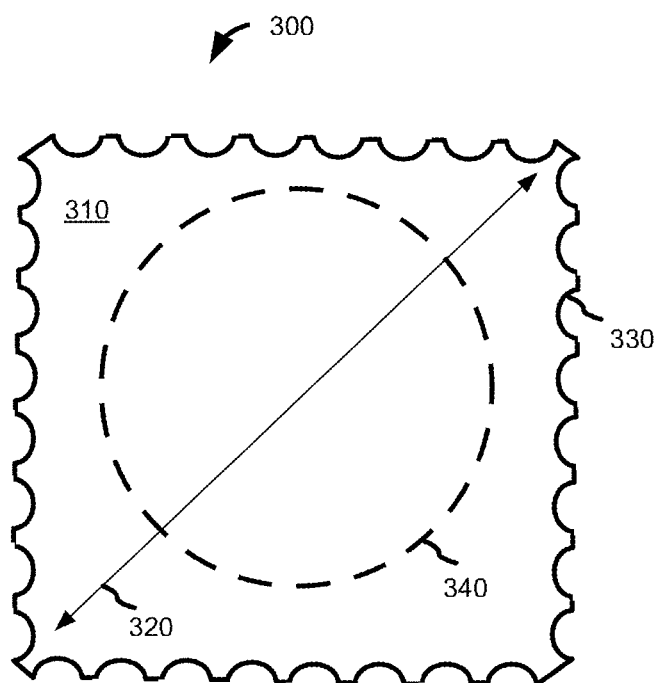


FIG. 6A

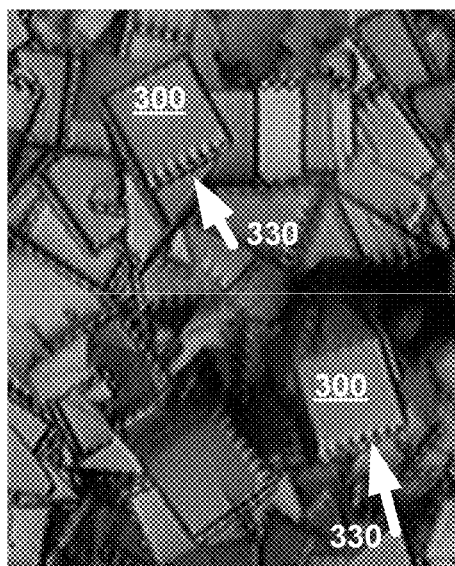


FIG. 6B

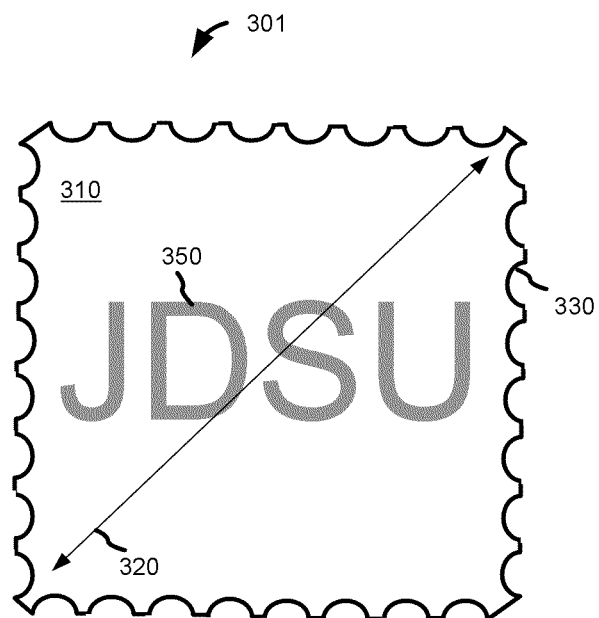


FIG. 7

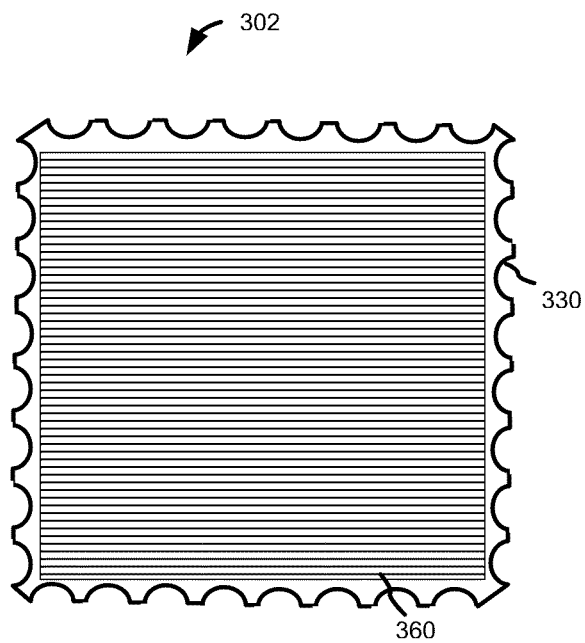


FIG. 8

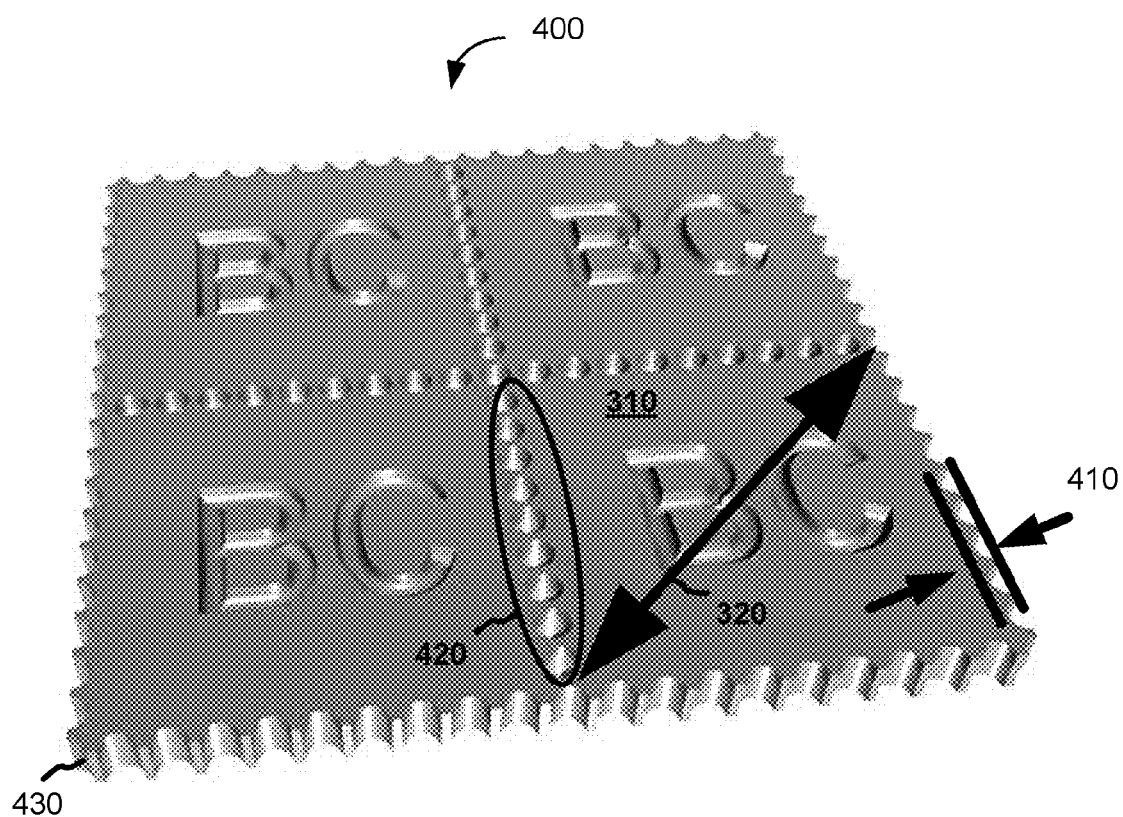


FIG. 9

FLAKES WITH UNDULATE BORDERS AND METHOD OF FORMING THEREOF

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This patent application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/243,122 filed Oct. 4, 2005, now issued U.S. Pat. No. 7,645,510, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/762,158 filed Jan. 20, 2004, now issued U.S. Pat. No. 7,241,489, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/641,695 filed Aug. 14, 2003, now issued U.S. Pat. No. 7,258,915, and also is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/243,111 filed Sep. 13, 2002, now issued U.S. Pat. No. 6,902,807, the disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference for all purposes. The U.S. patent application Ser. No. 11/243,122 also claims priority from U.S. provisional patent application No. 60/696,593 filed Jul. 5, 2005, which is incorporated herein by reference. The present application claims priority from U.S. provisional patent application No. 61/051,463 filed May 8, 2008, which is incorporated herein by reference for all purposes.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates generally to thin-film pigment flakes, and more particularly to a method of manufacturing of shaped flakes.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Specialty pigments are used in a variety of security applications, such as anti-counterfeiting devices printed on banknotes, packaging of high-value items, seals for containers, etc. One type of specialty pigments is color-shifting flakes used in special-effect inks. The color-shifting flakes are manufactured by deposition of several layers of various materials onto a substrate and then breaking the deposited coating into single flakes. This method results in irregularly-shaped pigment flakes.

Alternatively, flakes of a particular shape provide a security feature which is visible only under magnification. Additionally, shaped flakes may be used for coding of security inks or any other objects. Another anti-counterfeiting approach uses microscopic symbols, for example, embossed on the pigment flakes. A combination of the above features may be used in the same flakes for enhanced security.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to a method of manufacturing of pigment flakes including the steps of: (a) providing a substrate having a plurality of one-flake regions and a plurality of depressions or protrusions disposed therebetween and not extending into the one-flake regions, (b) coating the substrate with a releasable coating, and (c) removing the releasable coating and breaking it into the flakes; wherein two adjacent of the one-flake regions are separated by at least three of the depressions or protrusions for facilitating the breaking of the releasable coating into the flakes.

The invention provides a plurality of substantially same planar pigment flakes. Each flake includes one or more thin film layers and has a face surface and a flake border delimiting the face surface. A diameter of the face surface is

less than 100 microns and a thickness of the flake is less than 4 microns; the flake border undulates in the plane of the flake.

Another aspect of the present invention relates to a method of manufacturing of pigment flakes wherein a substrate has polygon-shaped one-flake regions with a number of sides between 3 and 6, and one or two rows of depressions or protrusions between two adjacent one-flake regions for forming a perforation line. The number of the depressions or protrusions per one side of the polygon-shaped one-flake regions is between 7 and 20.

The invention further provides a plurality of substantially same planar pigment flakes, wherein the each flake includes one or more thin film layers and has a face surface and a flake border delimiting the face surface. A diameter of the face surface is less than 100 microns and a thickness of the flake is less than 4 microns. Each flake has a square shape with at least three sides thereof being undulate lines in the plane of the flake, wherein each line undulates periodically and has a number of waves between 8 and 20 per side of the polygon.

Another feature of the present invention provides shaped pigment flakes with a symbol thereon and an undulate border. The invention provides a method of forming such flakes using a substrate with same-shaped one-flake regions separated by depressions or protrusions for facilitating breakage of the flakes along the undulate lines; the one-flake regions have the symbols formed therein.

Yet another aspect of this invention provides shaped grated flakes as well as a method of forming such flakes using a substrate with polygon-shaped one-flake regions which have grooves or ridges for providing a grating to the flakes, wherein the grooves or ridges of a first one-flake region are separated from the grooves or ridges of a second one-flake region by one or two rows of depressions or protrusions.

The invention also provides a sheet of one-flake regions, for forming the flakes defined in claim 1. The sheet has (a) a substrate having the one-flake regions and a plurality of depressions or protrusions disposed therebetween and not extending into the one-flake regions, and (b) a releasable coating coated onto the substrate, wherein a diameter of the one-flake regions is less than 100 microns and stripes of depressions and protrusions between two of the one-flake regions have a width of less than 20% of the diameter, and wherein two adjacent of the one-flake regions are separated by at least three of the depressions or protrusions for facilitating the breaking of the releasable coating into the flakes, so that breakage is likely to occur about the depressions or protrusions, when the releasable coating is separated into the flakes.

According to the invention, a plurality of substantially same pigment flakes is provided, wherein each flake has one or more thin film layers, a diameter of the flake is between 2 and 100 microns, and a thickness of the flake is less than 50% of the flake diameter, the flake border is an undulate line in the plane of the flake and has at least four waves per side of the flake.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention will be described in greater detail with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG. 1 is a micro photograph of a flake in accordance with the invention;

FIG. 2 is a schematic plan view of a deposition substrate in accordance with one embodiment of the invention;

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FIG. 3 is a schematic plan view in accordance with one embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 4 is a perspective view of the substrate shown in FIG. 3;

FIG. 5A is a schematic plan view of a deposition substrate for manufacturing flakes with symbols;

FIG. 5B is a schematic plan view of a deposition substrate for manufacturing grating flakes;

FIG. 6A is a schematic plan view of a pigment flake;

FIG. 6B is a micro photograph of flakes with undulate borders;

FIG. 7 is a schematic plan view of a pigment flake with a symbol;

FIG. 8 is a schematic plan view of a pigment flake with a diffraction grating; and,

FIG. 9 is a perspective view of a sheet of one-flake regions forming flakes with undulate borders.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The method described below provides pigment flakes, which are typically about 5-100 microns across, more typically about 20-40 microns across. The flakes have a postage stamp-like edge for easy severing along the designated lines during the manufacturing process. The perforation is enabled by using a particular structured deposition substrate which has teeth (protrusions) or holes (depressions) between one-flake regions. Portions of the flake material deposited into the holes or on top of the teeth easily break from the flake portions and from each other, thus creating flakes of a desired shape and debris fragments of a significantly size smaller than the flakes. FIG. 1 illustrates such a flake; small debris fragments are visible in the top right corner of the picture.

With reference to FIG. 2, a substrate 100 has a plurality of one-flake regions 110 and depressions or protrusions 120 disposed between the one-flake regions 110. The substrate 100 is designed for manufacturing of postage-stamp shaped flakes, wherein perforation between the flakes is formed by the depressions or protrusions 120.

The one-flake regions 110 have a shape selected for the flakes being manufactured. FIG. 2 shows the one-flake regions 110 to have a square shape; however, they may have other shapes, such as a circle or a polygon with 3 or 6 sides. The largest dimension of the one-flake region 110, a diameter 145, depends on the desired flake size, and is greater than 2 and less than 100 microns.

A strip of depressions and protrusions 120 between two of the one-flake regions 110 have a width of less than 20% of the diameter 145. In FIG. 2, the depressions or protrusions 120 form rows 130 so that one row 130 separates a pair of adjacent one-flake regions 110.

Breaking features 120 may be either depressions, or protrusions, or a mixture thereof. The depressions and protrusions 120 may be from 100 nm to 2000 nm deep or high, respectively.

The density of the depressions or protrusions 120 depends on the flake size; two adjacent one-flake regions 110 are separated by at least three depressions or protrusions 120 for facilitating the breaking of the releasable coating into the flakes. Preferably, the substrate 100 has from 7 to 20 depressions/protrusions 120 per a flake side.

By way of example, a substrate for manufacturing of 2×2 microns flakes has the depressions/protrusions 120 of about 0.1-0.2 microns in diameter, and a substrate for manufacturing of 25×25 microns flakes has the depressions/protrusions 120 of about 1.5-2.5 microns in diameter.

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In another example, for manufacturing of 15×15 microns square-shaped flakes shown in FIG. 6B, a substrate has a distance 140 between two neighboring strips of the depressions/protrusions 120, which are represented by rows 130, equal to 15 microns; the rows 130 include 7 holes per a 15-microns interval thus causing a side of the flake to have 7 waves.

The depressions and protrusions 120 are preferably round in the plane of the substrate so as to minimize the size of debris fragments for a given separation of the flakes; however the depressions/protrusions 120 may have any shape.

The depressions or protrusions 120 may be directly adjacent to one another or separated by an isthmus so as to guarantee separation of the debris into the smallest fragments when the flakes are released from the substrate.

With reference to FIG. 3, the depressions/protrusions 120 between two one-flake regions 110 may be arranged in a zigzag pattern 121 forming two rows 170 to ensure better separation of the debris fragments associated with single depressions or protrusions 120.

By way of example, FIG. 4 is a microphotograph of a portion of a substrate with two rows of depressions arranged in the zigzag pattern. The substrate is made by embossing a plastic film with a nickel shim.

Since the depressions or protrusions 120 are for breaking the one-flake regions 110 from one another, the depressions or protrusions 120 are not extending into the one-flake regions 110.

With reference to FIG. 5A, the one-flake regions 110 may have one or more symbols 150 embossed in the surface of the substrate 100 or protruding therefrom. The symbols 150 are understood to include alpha-numeric symbols, as well as logos, barcodes, etc.

With reference to FIG. 5B, the one-flake regions 110 may have grooves or ridges 160 for providing a grating structure to the flakes. The grooves or ridges 160 extend through the one-flake region 110 and the grooves or ridges 160 of one region 110 are separated from the grooves or ridges of another region 100 by a row of the depressions or protrusions 120, or by two rows, or by a strip of irregularly positioned depressions or protrusions 120. The grooves or ridges 160 may be spatially separated from the depressions or protrusions 120 by isthmuses as shown in FIG. 5B, or be in direct contact with the depressions or protrusions 120. The grooves or ridges 160 have a frequency in the range of from 100 to 5000 lines/mm.

Alternatively, the substrate 100 shown in FIG. 5B may have only the rows of the depressions or protrusions 120 which are orthogonal to the grooves or ridges 160. In that case, the releasable coating would break along the grooves or ridges 160 in one direction and along the rows 130 in another direction.

Deposition of a releasable coating onto the substrate 100 shown in FIG. 5B, subsequent removal of the coating and its breakage about the depressions/protrusions 120, result in diffractive flakes having a same pre-selected shape. Such flakes have their borders undulate in the plane of the flake, whereas conventional diffractive flakes, broken across their grooves, have an irregular shape and a flake border undulate up-and-down relative to the plane of the flake.

For the diffractive flakes, as well as for all the flakes of the instant invention, the in-plane undulate flake border is a result of the novel manufacturing process, which provides flakes of a preselected shape with very low quantity of debris and debris fragments of a smaller size than other methods.

Additionally, the in-plane undulate flake borders provide a security feature, which is difficult to counterfeit and simple to detect.

The substrate **100** may be formed of any material; however, plastic substrates, e.g. formed of polyethylene terephthalate (PET), are preferable.

The origination of the master for the fabrication of surface-relief microstructures for the structured substrate **100** may be fabricated using known techniques, such as laser writing, e-beam writing, diamond scribing, masking, etc. The methods of laser and e-beam direct writing are better suited when a fine microstructure is desired. After the original master is originated, a nickel shim is electroformed and recombined to get the final production Ni shim to a size desired in production. The nickel shim may be used in any of high resolution replication technologies, such as hot stamping, embossing, hot-roller embossing, injection-molding, UV casting-embossing, etc. In mass production of pigment flakes, the embossed substrate is a long roll of plastic foil, and the replication technology is UV casting or pressure/temperature embossing.

In the process of flake manufacturing, the substrate **100** is coated with one or more thin film layers forming a releasable coating. Usually a first layer of the releasable coating is a release layer, by way of example, made of a water-soluble material. In some cases, the microstructured layer itself can be soluble so that the release layer is not necessary.

A roll coater is one type of apparatus, which may be used to produce flakes according to embodiments of the invention. A roll of polymer substrate material is passed through a deposition zone(s) and coated with one or more thin film layers, which are typically 50 to 3000 nm thick layers of inorganic material; however organic layers also may be present. Multiple passes of the roll of polymer substrate back and forth through the deposition zone(s) may be made. Known deposition techniques include variations of chemical vapor deposition (CVD) and physical vapor deposition (PVD) methods. The releasable coating is then removed from the polymer substrate and broken into flakes. In more detail this process is described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,059,245, incorporated herein by reference.

By way of example, the releasable coating includes a reflector layer, an absorber layer, and a spacer layer therebetween, for manufacturing of color-shifting pigment flakes. Preferable materials are Aluminum, MgF_2 , and Chromium as described in the U.S. Pat. No. 5,059,245. Alternatively, the releasable coating is formed of one or more transparent or semi-transparent materials for manufacturing covert flakes for security applications as described in U.S. Pat. No. 7,258,915, incorporated herein by reference. Further, the releasable coating may include a metal layer for providing bright reflective flakes and/or a layer of magnetic material for orientation of the flakes in a magnetic field as described in U.S. Pat. No. 6,150,022, incorporated herein by reference. The releasable coating has a thickness in the range of from 100 nm to 4000 nm.

The substrate **100** has a microstructure that facilitates breaking of the flakes in specific shapes during the post-processing steps. These steps include stripping off the coating from the substrate **100** and grinding/sizing the stripped material. Also, in the printing application, some of the printing processes include the application of forces that tend to further break the flakes from each other.

One of the flakes manufactured as described above is schematically shown in FIG. 6A. The flake **300** has a face surface **310** and a flake border **330**, which delimits the face surface **310**. The flake **300** is formed of the one or more thin

film layers discussed above. A diameter **320** of the face surface **310** is less than 100 microns which corresponds to the diameter **145** of the one-flake region **110** shown in FIGS. 2, 3, 5A and 5B. A thickness of the flake **300** is less than 50% of the diameter **320** so as to ensure planar characteristics of the flake. The flake **300** has a planar central region **340**.

By way of example, FIG. 6B is a microphotograph of flakes similar to the flake **300** shown in FIG. 6A. The square flakes shown in FIG. 6B have a flake border with 7 waves per 15-microns side of the square.

Optionally, the flake **300**, shown as flake **301** in FIG. 7, has one or more symbols **350** thereon, which correspond to the symbols **150** on the substrate **100** shown in FIG. 5A.

Optionally, the flake **300**, shown as flake **302** in FIG. 8, has a diffraction grating **360** formed on the grooves or ridges **160** of the substrate **100** shown in FIG. 5B. It should be noted that the grating **360** and the grooves or ridges **160** are depicted not to scale for illustration purposes.

According to the instant invention, the flake border **330** shown in FIGS. 6-8 undulates in the plane of the flake.

The shaped pigment flakes of the instant invention, such as shown in FIGS. 1, 6A, 6B, 7 and 8, may be color-shifting flakes, bright reflective flakes, transparent or semi-transparent flakes, may include a magnetic material and/or have symbols thereon; the flakes may include multiple layers or be single-layer flakes, e.g. made of a metal or a transparent material. The flakes of the instant invention have a diameter between 2 and 100 microns and a thickness of from 100 nm to 4000 nm. The aspect ratio of flake diameter to flake thickness is at least 2 to 1 and preferably higher.

The pigment flakes formed by the method of the instant invention may have any preselected shape; however the polygon shapes are preferred because of easier perforation along the straight lines. Since at least some of the sides of the flakes are not straight but wavy (undulate) lines, the shape of the flakes is better described as a substantially polygonal shape.

The preferable number of sides in the polygon-shaped flakes is 3, 4 or 6, in order to ensure full utilization of the substrate surface. Preferably all the sides of the flakes are undulate lines; it is desirable for flakes to have at least three undulate sides.

In one embodiment, at least a portion of the flake border **330** undulates periodically and has at least four waves. With reference to FIG. 9, an amplitude **410** of the waves is less than 20% of the diameter **320** of the face surface **310**.

In practice, the undulate flake border is not necessarily an ideal postage-stamp-like border as shown e.g. in FIG. 6A. Some of the debris formed over the depressions or protrusions **120** may be still attached to the flake as it is shown in FIG. 1; all the border of the flake shown in FIG. 1 is an undulate line.

FIG. 9 shows a sheet **400** of one-flake regions **310** for forming the flakes **300**, **301**, or **302**. The sheet **400** includes the substrate **100**, not shown in FIG. 9, but shown in FIGS. 2-5B. Supported by the substrate **100** is a releasable coating **430** formed of the one or more thin film layers described above. The structural features of the substrate **100** are replicated in the coating **430**. The substrate **100** and the coating **430** have the one-flake regions **110/310** and the depressions or protrusions **120** disposed therebetween and not extending into the one-flake regions **110/310**. The diameter **145/320** of the one-flake regions is in the range of from 2 to 100 microns; and stripes **420** of the depressions or protrusions **120** between two of the one-flake regions **110/310** have a width of less than 20% of the diameter **145/320**. Two adjacent one-flake regions **110/310** are separated by at

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least three depressions or protrusions **120** for facilitating the breakage of the releasable coating **430** into the flakes **300**, **301** or **302**, so that breakage is likely to occur about the depressions or protrusions **120**, when the releasable coating **430** is separated into the flakes. At least some of the one-flake regions **110/310** may have symbols **150/350** or diffraction grating **160/360**. The coating **430** may be the color-shifting coating or any other coating described above.

Advantageously, the method of the instant invention creates less debris and of a smaller size than other known methods. The debris are less visually apparent and less likely to be mistaken for broken flakes because of the size difference. Further, the undulate borders of the flakes make counterfeiting more difficult and provide an additional product-authentication feature.

The shaped flakes can have other than optical applications. For example, specifically shaped thin flakes can carry drugs, e.g. by inhalation, to a particular part of the body; considering that a 8 micron shaped flake has dimensions close to those of blood cells. Alternatively, specifically microstructured shapes and the materials applied can be engineered to have high surface areas for catalysis purposes.

We claim:

1. A plurality of substantially same planar pigment flakes, each flake comprising one or more thin film layers, each flake having a face surface and a flake border delimiting the face surface, wherein the face surface has a shape substantially polygon and at least three sides of the polygon comprising undulate lines that undulate in the plane of the flake, and wherein the flakes have a same selected shape, a thickness of less than 4 microns, and a diameter of the face surface of less than 100 microns.

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2. The flakes as defined in claim 1, wherein the undulate lines each comprises at least four waves and wherein an amplitude of the waves is less than 20% of the diameter of the face surface.

3. The flakes as defined in claim 2, wherein the undulate lines undulate periodically.

4. The flakes as defined in claim 3, wherein the polygon is a square and the undulate lines have a number of waves between 7 and 20 per side of the polygon.

5. The flakes as defined in claim 3, wherein each flake comprises a symbol.

6. The flakes as defined in claim 3, wherein each flake comprises a diffraction grating.

7. The flakes as defined in claim 3, wherein the one or more thin film layers comprise a reflector layer, an absorber layer, and a spacer layer therebetween, for providing a color-shifting effect to the flakes.

8. A plurality of substantially same planar pigment flakes, each flake comprising one or more thin film layers, each flake having a face surface and a flake border delimiting the face surface, wherein the face surface has a shape substantially that of a polygon, wherein two adjoining sides of the polygon undulate in the plane of the flake, and wherein the flakes have a same selected shape and a diameter of the face surface of less than 100 microns.

9. The flakes as defined in claim 8, wherein each of the two adjoining sides comprises at least four waves and wherein an amplitude of the waves is less than 20% of the diameter of the face surface.

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